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Guided by His Word,
Serving in His Love

It's Always the "Ism" that Gets You

In an article on the prophets I was reading this week, the author noted that speaking against formalism, externalism and ritualism is not the same thing as condemning the formal, the external and the ritual. The problem is invariably the "ism," which, when attached to any concept, often speaks to a tendency to attach a status of "essential, end-all importance" to that concept at hand.

For example, every worship service has dimensions of form, externality and ritual. Regardless of how traditional or innovative the style, it will have a definite order (the form), it will still utilize certain symbols that point to the invisible (the external) and it will still have components that are always a part of every service (the ritual). It is only when these things become "essential, end-all" motions that give honor to God in and of themselves, or so the "worshipper" believes (whether or not a repentant and adoring heart is engaged), that these things become hypocritical "ism"s.

Legalism was certainly a bane to Paul's ministry. He was constantly encountering and correcting those who taught that observing the Law of Moses was the "essential end-all" of pleasing God. He was adamant that no one is saved by works of the Law. Still, he never spoke out against the notion of law itself. On the contrary, he condemned every spirit of lawlessness. The Lord certainly brings freedom to our lives in terms of our right to stand before Him, but many through the years have embraced an attitude of "antinomianism" (we might call it "freedom-ism") that so utterly casts off the restraints of any and all law that personal boundaries, social sensitivities, civil policies and good sense are discarded – all in the name of freedom.

The dreaded "health, wealth and prosperity gospel" has a tendency to put mainline Christians in an awkward position. After all, who wants to be put in a position to suggest that God does *NOT* intend such good things for His children? Perhaps, I will begin referring to such teaching as "health-ism, wealth-ism and prosperity-ism". That might help to identify the "essential, end-all" character given to health, wealth and prosperity teaching by its proponents. After all, that is the part that shipwrecks the

faith of many. Such teaching makes little provision for understanding the place of hardship or suffering, not to mention the sovereign choice of God *NOT* to make one healthy, wealthy or rich. All that remains is for a person to question the authenticity of his or her faith when certain things do not come his or her way.

"Success-ism" may be the flavor of the moment in the world of "ism"s. No thinking Christian would challenge that God is the giver of all kingdom successes, but when believers are sent off looking for their own successes as the "essential end-all" of faith, the pursuit of the actual will of God, not to mention, contentment with the actual gifts of God are among the first casualties. Attaching Bible stories to pop psychology and current marketing trends is widely received as profound Bible teaching because it satisfies what itching ears want to hear. In the meantime, any pursuit of the actual mind and character of God are relegated to a secondary status.

And, how can we ever assess the kingdom damage that the defenders of "ism"s have wrought throughout the ages when those "ism"s are attached to the names of great leaders, thinkers and reformers? Churches are torn apart because a hyper-devotion to one "ism" renders a man a natural enemy to another "ism", whether or not an honest and peace-loving intellectual curiosity has pursued a thorough understanding of either point of view.

In every generation, there is a need for all of us to be reminded that the only "essential, end-all" of faith is Jesus. Through Him, we learn the mind of God. Through Him, we discover the life of true holiness. Through Him, we learn to appreciate the place of suffering and the value of contentment. And only through Him are we saved, most significantly from our sins, but also from the destruction, the divisiveness and the disappointment of the "ism" of the fleeting moment.



Karl's Korner